

## Deeper Seasons

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# Deeper Seasons

by [piecrust](#)

## Summary

Lan Qiren reads books and Wei Wuxian worms his way into Qiren's heart.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Winter

Qiren brushes snow off his shoulders before entering the library.

The first snowfall of the year used to hurt him – and truth be told, it still does – but it's more like a soft ache now. Almost 40 years have passed now, and he's surprised to find that time does take away some of the knife-sharp, almost unbearable pain away.

He walks into the library and straight to the book of poems that he knows that only he reads.

It's become something like a... ritual now. When the first snow of the year falls in Gusu, Qiren will go into the library and read the book of poems.

It's not a prolific book or a particularly famous book... but it's a book that he read shortly after his brother went into seclusion.

Rain fell when his brother hid himself away – almost as if the sky was crying in Qiren's stead. He wasn't able to cry then, not under the cold gaze of his father. But he had ached. It had felt like his heart was being cut out of his body, watching his brother walk into shame. He had always... loved his brother. Loved him more than anyone else. Respected him more than anyone else. It had been... difficult to understand why his brother – who shone brighter than anyone – would throw his whole life away for a woman.

It had hurt to watch his brother choose a woman who didn't deserve him.

Hurt to watch his brother defend a woman who didn't deserve him.

Hurt to watch his brother hide himself away.

(Hide himself away from their father, from Gusu, from Qiren – from *Qiren*, from **Qiren**)

Qiren had found the book of poems that winter, the day of the first snow fall.

And Qiren, who had been aching and aching and *aching*, walking around Gusu barely able to breathe around the knife in his heart... found the tiniest ray of hope in the little book.

Something about the poems, simple and stupid, made him feel as if... as if good things could still happen.

The next day, he received news that that woman was pregnant.

A-Huan had come into his life little and quiet and *good*. He was the first real warmth Qiren had felt in over a year and Qiren had felt a little bit saved.

Qiren read the little book of poems to A-Huan on the first snowfall of that year. He read it to A-Huan like a prayer and nothing bad happened that year. In fact, only good things happened that year. A-Huan grew under Qiren's watchful care. Qiren watched him take his first steps,

witnessed his first smile, and with every milestone, Qiren felt the knife in his heart grow a little bit smaller.

Qiren read that book of poems every year on the first snowfall of the year, always walking hurriedly to the library, shaking and desperate, and nothing bad happened.

Qiren read that book of poems every year for 6 years and on the first snowfall of the 7th year, as he came out of the library, he received news that the woman was pregnant again.

A-Zhan was little and quiet and adored by Qiren and A-Huan. When Qiren sat in his room, A-Zhan in his arms and A-Huan sitting obediently next to him, cooing down at his little brother, for the first time in nearly a decade, Qiren felt like he could really breathe.

Qiren knew then that it was a... stupid thing to believe – knows it now – but... but... there's something inside of him that believes, just a little bit, that if he reads that book of poems, it will protect him from bad things.

*(After all, the only year he wasn't able to read the book on the first snowfall, Cloud Recesses burned and his brother burned with it)*

Qiren walks to where he knows the book of poems is and... and it's not there.

He looks around, taking deep breaths, pretending that the tips of his fingers aren't tingling nervously. Someone must have misplaced it – must have moved it around accidentally. He's read that book every year for almost 40 years now and... and it's never not been there when he's needed it.

He looks around and it's embarrassing but he feels... panic. A cold shiver travels up his spine to the top of head and it feels like the air is getting thinner because it's getting hard to breathe.

He *needs* to read that book.

He has to read it *today*.

He has to or... or...

He runs his tongue over his lips that have gone suddenly dry, and walks around the library, his eyes searching desperately.

He finds it on a table near the window. A hand is over the cover but Qiren would recognize that book anywhere.

He breathes a sigh of relief, placing a hand over his heart. He hadn't realized how fast it was beating. He feels a bit silly now. It's just a book. It's *just* a book...

He takes a few breathes to calm himself and walks over to the disciple who is slumped over the desk, obviously asleep.

It's Wei Wuxian.

*(Qiren had read the book the year that Wei Wuxian died and had thought the book had worked, and he had read the book the year that Wei Wuxian came back and had thought the book had worked)*

Wei Wuxian is in Gusu Lan robes – he wears them sometimes, now that he’s married to Wangji – and he’s slumped over the desk, a small mountain of books next to him. He’s sleeping peacefully, but he’s only in his robes and it’s still snowing outside and the library is cold.

Qiren shrugs off his thick, outer robe, and places it over Wei Wuxian’s shoulders. Wei Wuxian is still developing his new core and Wangji would be... upset if his husband caught a cold.

He slips the book of poems out from under Wei Wuxian’s hand and sits down next to him to read.

Wangji comes in as Qiren finishes the book.

Qiren lifts a finger to his lips, “Shh,” he says, “he’s sleeping.”

Wangji stares at them, looking a bit shocked. He stays still for a moment before coming back to himself and walking towards them.

“Wei Ying seems to be weak to the cold,” Wangji says, brushing some loose strands of hair from Wei Wuxian’s face, “He gets tired easily when it’s cold.”

“Well, he *is* from Yunmeng,” Qiren answers, standing up.

Wangji runs his hand over Qiren’s robe that is blanketing Wei Wuxian and looks up at Qiren questioningly. “Uncle, is this... yours?”

Qiren feels embarrassed. “Get some ginseng tea from the healer, it will improve circulation and help with energy,” he says instead, averting his eyes from Wangji’s.

Wei Wuxian stirs then, wiping his face with his arms and blinking up Wangji slowly as if his eyelids are sticky. “Lan Zhan?” he breathes, “Are you here or am I dreaming?”

Wangji huffs a laugh – and Qiren would have welcomed Wei Wuxian so much sooner if he had only known that he could make Wangji laugh. “I’m here,” Wangji replies gently, running fingers through Wei Wuxian’s bangs, and the look in his eyes is so tender that Qiren feels embarrassed to watch them.

Wei Wuxian smiles up at Wangji, looking sleep-soft and young and content, and in that moment, Qiren can’t help but think that the book is working already. Now if only Xichen...

“Oh, uncle, you’re here!” Wei Wuxian says suddenly. He’s taken to calling Qiren ‘uncle’ after getting married to Wangji and... Qiren doesn’t... hate it.

“Don’t hoard all the books! Read one at a time,” Qiren scolds, not really knowing what else to say.

Wei Wuxian smiles cheekily up at him. One of his cheeks is red from being smooshed onto the desk for so long and he really shouldn't look so pleased at being scolded. "I'm a dragon that hoards books, uncle," he says, lifting his hands and curling his fingers like claws and roaring like a... dragon...

His biggest failure as a teacher, Qiren thinks exasperatedly.

Wei Wuxian looks at the book in Qiren's hand and his eyes brighten in recognition. "Are you going to read that, uncle?"

"Already did," Qiren says, lifting the book to his chest self-consciously.

"It's good, huh?" Wei Wuxian asks, standing up with Wangji's help.

"Not good," Qiren says, "Simple, boring poems at best."

Wei Wuxian rubs his nose, leaning into Wangji's embrace shamelessly. "I don't know," he says, "I don't know a lot about poetry but something about those poems makes me feel like... like something good is coming my way." He smiles up at Wangji. "I guess my something good is already here though."

He really is from Yunmeng, Qiren thinks faintly. Always attempting the impossible. Always surprising Qiren in the strangest of ways.

He turns away, afraid of what might show on his face just then. "Nonsense," he sniffs, "Stop falling asleep in random places and get some ginseng tea from the healers," he scolds, and he walks out of the library, the book still in his hands, his robe still on Wei Wuxian.

The first snow of the year is still falling in Gusu and, for some reason, for the first time in almost 40 years, the snow looks beautiful.

Good things are coming his way.

# Spring

Qiren is enjoying a rare day off.

He's sat outside his room, a small table next to him, a pot full of tea, and a good book in his hands.

Spring is in full swing, the air sweet with the scent of flowers and the sun warm in a way that hit deep inside you without being too hot on the skin.

The winter passed had been... nice. Strangely full of laughter and warmth and fresh chestnuts. Wei Wuxian, as usual, had caused endless trouble – bringing snowmen to life and having disciples fight against them. The main courtyard had been ruined! And the carefully cultivated silence and peace in Cloud Recesses had been smashed to pieces. The disciples had laughed so loudly that worried townspeople in Caiyi had come up to the gates of Cloud Recesses to ask if everything was okay.

Just remembering it gives Qiren a headache... Wei Wuxian... that naughty boy...

He shakes his head, and tries to focus back on his book. Wei Wuxian will not ruin this rare day for Qiren... he won't!

Anyway, Qiren likes Spring better. Even if the winter just passed had been... nicer than usual. Spring is undeniably the better season.

Qiren settles back into his book, when a loud, not at all Gusu-Lan type yell, shocks him back out.

“Uncle!”

Qiren looks up to see Wei Wuxian... Wei Wuxian who is running towards him at a considerable speed, his smile blinding.

“No running in Cloud Recesses!” Qiren barks. Wei Wuxian, of course, does not slow down at all. If anything, he seems to speed up, laughter falling out of his mouth helplessly. Qiren's not surprised. He knows it's useless to rebuke Wei Wuxian, but it makes him feel better. He's the grandmaster! Even if everyone else in Cloud Recesses has stopped rebuking Wei Wuxian (all because they are afraid of Wangji – the cowards!) Qiren has to!

“Uncle!” Wei Wuxian breathes, when he reaches him, sliding to a stop and just barely crashing into the beam, “Uncle, a gift for you.” Wei Wuxian hands him precisely two flowers tied up with a red ribbon.

Qiren just stares at him for a couple of seconds, debating on whether he wants to recite the 10 rules Wei Wuxian has broken just now, before giving up and just taking the flowers from Wei Wuxian's fingers.

Wei Wuxian smiles at him, eyes bright and mischievous, watching Qiren's face eagerly for a reaction.

"No killing in Cloud Recesses," Qiren says, sort of at a loss of what to say, "Picking a flower is technically killing it."

Wei Wuxian frowns and puffs his cheeks out like a child. "I didn't pick these in Cloud Recesses," he says, "Also, look at the ribbon! The talisman I sewed onto it will keep these flowers alive for a long time. The bouquet I gave Lan Zhan last fall is still alive!"

Qiren looks down at the ribbon in interest. There is a talisman that has been (horribly) sewed it. He runs his fingers down the ribbon and feels the faint thrum of spiritual energy.

"Not a horrible invention," Qiren concedes.

Wei Wuxian takes a seat beside Qiren and drinks Qiren's tea without asking.

"I made Lan Zhan a huge bouquet, but you only get two flowers because you were mean to me last week," Wei Wuxian says cheekily. He's a mess – his hair sticking to his temple and barely held together by his ribbon. His fingers are dirt stained and there's a streak of dirt on his neck.

Qiren can't believe he's technically part of his family. He feels dirty just looking at him.

"I was actually only gonna give you one flower, but I picked two so they won't be lonely," Wei Wuxian continues, either oblivious to his filth or not caring. "If you're nice to me, I'll pick you a huge bouquet in the fall!"

Qiren sighs and puts the flowers down on the table. He moves the table away and pulls Wei Wuxian's shoulder so that he's sat in front of Qiren, his back towards him.

"Stop speaking nonsense," Qiren chides, undoing Wei Wuxian's ribbon so that his hair falls down. "How can you go around looking like this? I feel itchy just looking at you." He combs his fingers through Wei Wuxian's hair, trying to bring it into some sort of order. It would be better if he had his comb, but he's doesn't feel like putting in that amount of effort for something he knows will be messed back up within the hour.

Wei Wuxian is surprisingly still under his ministrations.

It reminds Qiren of when he used to tie Xichen and Wangji's hair for them when they were children.

Xichen had always smiled through it, humming strange songs underneath his breath. Qiren had always had to tell him to stay still – to not nod his head to the music playing inside it. Xichen would run off the moment Qiren would say he was done, eager to play whatever song he had in his head. He never checked Qiren's work – never.

Wangji had always stayed completely still, his brows serious – even as a young child. He'd always – always – check Qiren's work. Making sure his ribbon was straight and that not a



hair was out of place. Qiren would wait there, feeling strangely nervous, before Wangji gave his nod of approval and bowed his thanks.

He misses the little babies he cared for more and more often as he grows older.

“There,” he says, tying the red ribbon back into place. He grabs a handkerchief from the table and wipes the dirt off of Wei Wuxian’s neck. “Now you look somewhat civilized.”

Wei Wuxian stays still for a moment longer before turning carefully back to look at Qiren. There’s something... open and vulnerable in his eyes, to Qiren’s surprise. He looks so young then, so young and shocked and... and just a touch insecure.

“What?” Qiren barks, averting his eyes. He feels embarrassed for some reason.

“You must really want the bouquet, huh, uncle?” Wei Wuxian says cheekily – but there’s something... strange about his tone. Something too breathy and shaky.

It makes Qiren wonder if he crossed some line – some strange line that only Wei Wuxian knows.

“Who wants your bouquet?” Qiren sniffs, turning to place the table between him and Wei Wuxian again. “Next time, I will come with you to pick your bouquet. A proper bouquet is an art form, you know. Not just a bunch of flowers shoved together.”

That seems to break Wei Wuxian out of whatever stupor he is in. He leans back onto his elbows (like a heathen) and smiles. “Lan Zhan seems to like my bouquet just fine,” he says.

“Wangji is not a reliable critic where you are concerned,” Qiren replies.

Actually, Wangji is not a reliable anything where Wei Wuxian is concerned. Just last week, he went all the way to Lotus Pier, without telling anyone, to pick up a crate of some sort of chili oil that Wei Wuxian favors. Wangji is the Chief Cultivator for god’s sake. Qiren had had to entertain clan leaders for a whole day! Clan Leader Yao was there! It was... hell!

“Anyway,” he continues, taking a sip of tea, “if an elder tells you to do something, you just say yes and do it – no arguing.”

“Ah, yes, uncle,” Wei Wuxian says flippantly. He lays down completely on the ground (like a complete, utter heathen!)

“Read to me, uncle,” he says, his eyes closed and his feet swinging lazily off the porch. This is the worst posture Qiren has ever seen. His back hurts just watching him.

“You have some nerve, Wei Wuxian,” Qiren sniffs, opening his book and taking another sip of tea to clear his throat. “I am your elder – it isn’t right to order me around.”

Wei Wuxian turns and tugs at Qiren’s robes underneath the table. “Please,” he whines, “please, uncle. I’ll bring you a big bouquet next time. Read to me!”

Qiren just barely resists the urge to roll his eyes.

Honestly, Wei Wuxian is the biggest child he's ever met. It's a wonder he has time to miss little A-Huan and A-Zhan when Wei Wuxian bothers him so often.

"Whining is forbidden in Cloud Recesses," he says, before beginning to read aloud from the first chapter.

Wei Wuxian falls asleep before Qiren reaches the second chapter, his breathe evening out and his swinging legs stilling.

Wangji comes to join them not long after Wei Wuxian falls asleep. (Wangji has some sort of tracking talisman on Wei Wuxian – Lan Qiren is sure of it!)

Wangji takes the scene before him in stride, carefully lifting Wei Wuxian's legs, so they aren't hanging below the porch anymore, and repositioning him so that his head is pillowed on Wangji's lap.

"Please, uncle, continue," he says softly.

Qiren is enjoying a rare day off.

The sun is warm on his skin and he has flowers on his table.

His nephew is sat beside him, enjoying his company, and the little nuisance his nephew calls his husband is napping away.

Qiren has never been one for daydreaming, but he thinks that even in his wildest dreams, he would ever imagine being this... happy.

## Summer

Qiren is of the opinion that if anything bad is to happen, it will most likely happen in the summer.

Something about the heat and long days brings trouble and, of course, this year trouble finds Wei Wuxian.

“Lan Zhan, I’ll be fine,” Wei Wuxian rasps out, pulling his hand out of Wangji’s grasp and shooing him away. “You’ve been here for days. Go take a break. Uncle will take good care of me.”

“Wangji,” Qiren says, standing behind him, “Clan leaders have been kept waiting. Go see to your duties and rest afterwards.”

Wangji sits there, staring uselessly at Wei Wuxian for a few more moments before nodding slightly and moving to stand.

“Uncle,” he says with a small nod, “Wei Ying...”

Qiren almost wants to roll his eyes, but years and years and *years* of practicing restraint stops him. Qiren has only taken care of hundreds and hundreds of sick and injured disciples. Does Wangji think his own uncle will not be able to handle watching over one sick Wei Wuxian? It’s almost insulting.

Well it would be insulting if Wangji was known to show any sort of sense when it came to his husband... So Qiren just nods and moves past Wangji to sit in the seat next to Wei Wuxian’s bed.

Qiren can feel Wangji just stand there for a few more moments, just staring at Wei Wuxian.

“Go!” Wei Wuxian rasps out, lifting his head off the pillow and shooing with his hand, “Listen to me or I’m going to stay sick for longer just to spite you.”

“I will be back soon,” Wangji says as he leaves the room.

Wei Wuxian flops back onto the bed with a sigh, “It’s your fault uncle,” he says, “You raised him stubborn.”

“Nonsense,” Qiren huffs, “Wangji was perfectly obedient before he met you. *You* corrupted him!”

“Me!?” Wei Wuxian asks innocently, blinking his big eyes at Qiren. It’s not endearing at all – sickening, really.

“Stop fluttering your eyes stupidly,” Qiren grunts, moving the blanket back around Wei Wuxian’s shoulders and tucking him in. He wrings out the towel in the basin and taps it

around Wei Wuxian's sweaty temple. He's not worried about how Wei Wuxian is shivering in the summer heat – he's not. He's not worried at all. Wei Wuxian is going to be fine.

He will be fine.

“You don't have to stay here, uncle,” Wei Wuxian whispers out with a sigh, “I'll be fine. I'm sure you have better things to do than just watch me.”

Qiren doesn't have time right then to dissect why this awful boy makes his heart ache sometimes, and he doesn't want to look too deeply into why it makes him angry when he sees Wei Wuxian push care away but...

“Quiet,” he says, running the towel along his brow and down his temple, “Only you would go to cleanse the river of water ghouls and have them turn into a monster.”

“I didn't make them a monster,” he whines, turning away from Qiren's hand when Qiren tries to wipe his eyes. “Besides, the monster didn't make me sick – it was those stupid fishermen!”

Qiren knows that is true. From what he read on the report from the junior disciples that had followed Wei Wuxian, Wei Wuxian had defeated the river monster quite quickly. He fell to this illness while saving a few fishermen that had jumped into the water in a deluded attempt to help him. He had taken in too much of a contaminated dark water and the dark water had brought his spiritual energy down to such a degree that when he gave the kiss of life to save a drowned fisherman, he contracted the illness the fishermen had had.

Trouble, basically.

Only Wei Wuxian would go out for a simple river cleansing and come back with a non-cultivational illness. His golden core is strong enough now that it burns through the medicine too quickly for Wei Wuxian to have any pain relief, but his golden core is still too weak to heal him from this illness. All they can do it wait.

Qiren puts the towel back in the basin and sits back to watch Wei Wuxian.

His eyes are closed now, his brows furrowed just a bit in pain as he shivers underneath his blanket.

The healer had said that the illness would take its course and that Wei Wuxian would be fully healed in a week, so Wei Wuxian will be fine.

He will be fine.

But... but it's still strangely horrible to watch him suffer.

Qiren doesn't know what comes over him, but he shoves his hand under the blanket and finds Wei Wuxian's hand and holds it.

It's what Wangji had been doing, and Qiren finds that maybe Wangji had been doing it not only for Wei Wuxian, but maybe to steady himself as well, because there is something grounding in touching Wei Wuxian – like maybe if Qiren holds him, he can share some of the

pain? Because it's strangely horrible watching him suffer – strange in a way Qiren never imagined he could feel for...

And Qiren hasn't felt this sort of helplessness in years. Not since...

"I'm a married man, uncle," Wei Wuxian says, a cheeky smile on his face, but he squeezes Qiren's hand in his.

Horrible boy. Horrible, no good, boy.

"For your insolence, I'm going to assign you to library duty for six months once you get better," Qiren says biting.

Wei Wuxian, infuriatingly enough, huffs a soft laugh, coughing at the end. "You don't really want me in the library, uncle," he says closing his eyes and taking a labored breath, "I'll make an indecent reads section and you and Lan Zhan will be so mad at me."

Qiren thinks this over and sighs, running his other hand through his beard. "Nonsense, Wangji doesn't get mad at you for anything. He'd probably abuse his powers as chief cultivator and set up an indecent reads section for you himself if he thought that was what you really wanted."

Wei Wuxian coughs another laugh, his eyes still closed, his hand still squeezing Qiren's.

"Lan Zhan gets mad at me, uncle," he says, sleep slurring his words just a tiny bit, "he's mad at me right now – can't you tell?"

Horrible boy.

Qiren doesn't understand why this evil boy has forced himself a place in Qiren's heart if all he does is hurt it.

"Is that what you think he is?" Qiren asks softly, rubbing his thumb over the meat of Wei Wuxian's palm. Qiren waits till he hears Wei Wuxian's wheezy breathing even out before he runs his fingers over Wei Wuxian's head, settling down stray strands of hair.

"Stupid boy," he chides gently, "can't you tell the difference between worry and anger?"

The room is almost unbearably hot in the summer sun, and sweat is pooling between Wei Wuxian's hand in Qiren's, but Qiren strangely can't find it in himself to let go.

He watches the man, who at one point in time he considered the bane of his existence, and...

Well, Qiren isn't worried.

He brought a book to read but it stays closed as he sits by Wei Wuxian's side, lost in thought. Maybe it's old age or maybe it's just that Wei Wuxian is strange and uncomfortable and loving in ways that constantly catch Qiren off guard, but...

He's still holding Wei Wuxian's hand when Wangji returns.

It's late then, the night breaking the summer heat and bringing in a cool mountain breeze.

Qiren pulls his hand from Wei Wuxian's and tucks the blanket securely behind him as he pulls his hand out.

"I told you to rest," Qiren says, feeling slightly embarrassed for some reason. He feels like he's shown too much – like he's been caught with his heart out. It's strange to feel that way in front of his nephew, but he does.

"I will rest with Wei Ying," Wangji says. He places a tray of food down. "You missed dinner, uncle."

"You didn't have to bring it here – one missed meal won't kill me," Qiren says, still feeling found out and embarrassed in a way that surprises him. Affection – the sheer embarrassment of having it and showing it. And... Wei Wuxian. The horrible boy who forced these horrible feelings into Qiren.

This is horrible – all horrible.

"We haven't shared a meal in a while," Wangji says, breaking Qiren from his thoughts, "I thought..."

Oh gods.

Qiren so badly wants to enjoy a meal with his nephew so it's strange why he has this sudden urge to run. Everything is so embarrassing. His nephew bringing him a meal out of meal time and asking to eat with him. Eating in an improper setting with his nephew's sick husband sleeping beside them. It's all too... affectionate...

He wants to run, but he has years and years and *years* of practicing restraint that stops him.

"That will be... acceptable," he says, moving slowly from the chair to the seat Wangji has prepared for him.

Qiren sits across from his nephew and enjoys a quiet meal.

It's... strange.

Summer has brought trouble, but this year, for some strange reason, trouble wasn't the only thing it brought, and Qiren can't tell which is worse.

The trouble or the affection.

# Fall

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The mountains catch on fire when fall finds her way to Gusu.

The long grass bends gently in the cool breeze, green strands turning pale yellow, shimmering like gold in the sunlight. The leaves ripen to brilliant shades of red and orange before falling to the forest floor below, and fall flowers bloom in bright pinks and yellows and deep purples – almost like a final hurrah before they sleep for the winter.

Fall in Gusu brings fire to the mountains, and this year is no different. The mountains are on fire and...

The mountains are on *fire*.

Qiren stares at the smoke billowing in ugly black clouds and is disgusted with himself at how helpless he feels.

More than twenty years have gone by and he's still as useless as ever.

He's so useless.

So useless.

He can't protect his brother or his nephews or his Sect or his home.

He can't protect anyone.

He's so useless.

So useless.

"Uncle!"

Wei Wuxian grabs his arm, shaking his attention to him. His eyes are wide and worried, but there's a reassuring smile on his lips.

"Uncle, this boat will take you to Lotus Pier – Jiang Cheng will help you," he says hurriedly. He moves to let go of Qiren's arm, but Qiren grabs Wei Wuxian's hand before he can step back.

"You..." he says, and he doesn't know what else to say. He's so useless. He's so disgusted with himself. His home is on fire and his nephew is injured and unconscious behind him and...

“Uncle,” Wei Wuxian says, putting his hand over Qiren’s. He looks as serious as Qiren has ever seen him – so unlike the naughty troublemaker Qiren has come to... know over the past year. Qiren is surprised to find he doesn’t like this seriousness on him. “I will protect Cloud Recesses. You take care of Lan Zhan, okay? Come back with Jiang Cheng when you can – but... Uncle... you take care, okay?”

His eyes are wide and worried but there’s still a reassuring smile on his lips and Qiren wants to drag this horrible boy onto the boat. He wants to tell this horrible boy that he wants to stay with him. He wants to tell this horrible boy that...

“You’re in my care too,” he says, and it’s mortifying how his voice breaks. Mortifying how his hand trembles as it grasps desperately onto Wei Wuxian. “Who will protect you?”

Wei Wuxian’s smile grows then – finally reaches his eyes. He huffs a soft laugh. “Don’t worry about me, uncle, I’m a horrible boy, remember?” he says cheekily, and he rips his arm out of Qiren’s grip and steps back off the boat and onto the dock. He pushes the boat with his foot and activates a few talismans – for protection, for guidance, for speed. Talismans he shouldn’t be able to activate. Power he shouldn’t have.

Qiren watches helplessly as Wei Wuxian turns to run towards the fire and...

“You promised me a bouquet,” he yells desperately, and it’s humiliating – he knows it’s humiliating – but it’s all he can say right then. His eyes haven’t burned like this since he watched his brother turn away from him all those years ago and he hadn’t known what to say then and he doesn’t know what to say now, but he knows from experience that it’s better to say something – anything.

Wei Wuxian promised him a bouquet in the fall and Qiren trusts that he will protect Cloud Recesses but...

“Don’t forget your promise!” he yells, and it’s so much less than what he wants to say, but somehow he trusts that that horrible boy will understand.

Qiren trusts that horrible boy to protect Cloud Recesses but... he’s so reckless with himself... And Qiren has never known a home other than Cloud Recesses but now he can’t imagine a home without that horrible boy and...

Wei Wuxian turns back only for a split second before turning around to continue running up towards the fire.

Horrible boy.

Horrible, willful, pitiful boy.

Qiren knows he should turn to tend to Wangji. Knows that there is nothing he can do now that the boat is moving. Knows that it’s useless to just sit there and stare at the boy in black robes running to save a home that has only recently opened its heart to him.

Qiren knows this.



But he still can't tear his eyes away.

Qiren wants to be angry. Wants to be angry at Wei Wuxian who forced a space for himself in Qiren's heart and made him care and now makes him worry. He wants to be angry at himself for being so useless. Wants to be angry at those damned Moling Su sect cultivators who bid their time to take their revenge.

But regret and worry grow too monstrously for anger to have any space. Anger will have to grow later. Later when the mountains of Cloud Recesses aren't on fire. Later when Wei Wuxian is whole and safe in front of Qiren.

Later.

When even the black clouds are a small speck in the distance, Qiren turns slowly to look at Wangji.

Wangji is in the same position that Wei Wuxian had laid him down in. There is blood on his robes – mostly not his – and his face is placid.

Qiren is useless, his golden core temporarily sealed away by those damned Moling Su cultivators. He's useless and he can't help his nephew or his nephew's damned husband or even his home...

But...

He sits down beside Wangji and holds Wangji's hand in his.

"Xichen is there," he says with a shaking breath, "Xichen is there and Wei Wuxian is strong. Everything will be okay, Wangji. Do not worry."

Wangji stays silent and unconscious beside him.

"The talisman Wei Wuxian used will bring us to Lotus Pier before nightfall," he continues, rubbing his thumb over Wangji's hand, willing his own hand not to shake. "The healers of Lotus Pier will help us. I'm sure Jiang Wanyin will make his way to Cloud Recesses as soon as we tell him the news."

"Everything will be okay, Wangji. Xichen is there and Wei Wuxian is strong."

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A calm, cold fury washes over Jiang Wanyin when Qiren tells him the news.

The remaining Moling Su Sect cultivators had allied themselves with barbarians from the north. They had infiltrated Caiyi and had attacked Wangji, Wei Wuxian, and Qiren while they were out having a meal together. They had remembered their dark knowledge and used it to seal away their spiritual energy. They had set the mountains on fire. They had poisoned Wangji. They had almost killed him –

But they had miscalculated.

Wei Wuxian never needed spiritual energy to be dangerous. And Wei Wuxian was never more dangerous than when he had something to protect.

“The barbarians do not seem to be cultivators... They were quite... frightened by Wei Wuxian’s display,” Qiren says with a calm he does not feel, “I do not know what they seek to gain from allying with the Moling Su but if I were to guess, I think they seek to take over Caiyi.” Territory by the water was precious – Qiren could not think of another reason why non-cultivators would ally with the Moling Su to take over a mountain.

Zidian crackles dangerously on Jiang Wanyin’s closed fist.

“Prepare the disciples,” he barks, “We will leave at nightfall. Tell everyone to bring cotton or wool to block their ears. The Moling Su are using evil methods.”

He turns to walk out of the healer’s room but stops at the door.

“Grandmaster,” he says, “You stay here with... Hanguang-jun. I will send a messenger with word of when it is safe.”

“I will go with you,” Wangji says before Qiren can respond. He struggles to a sitting position, his hand going over his wound unconsciously. He’s still pale and his spiritual energy has not completely returned yet... He’s in no condition to travel...

Jiang Wanyin glances at Wangji coldly. “Do whatever you want,” he says, “but we will not slow down for you. I intend to make it to Cloud Recesses while Wei Wuxian is still alive.”

He walks out of the room before anyone else can say anything.

Qiren knows he should stop Wangji. Knows that he should say something to keep Wangji from hurting himself needlessly. He knows that’s what he should do...

He puts a hand on Wangji’s arm and another on his shoulder, steadying him.

“We will take a boat back to Caiyi,” he says.

Wangji turns sharply to look at him. He looks as vulnerable as Qiren has ever seen him, his eyes wide and worried and... surprised.

“It will be slower than flying,” Qiren continues, “but if we take the boat I’m sure you will be healed enough by then to join the fight.”

Wangji stares at him for a few more seconds before nodding stiltedly and Qiren is grateful that Wangji doesn’t fight him.

He’s not sure he could stay strong on what’s best for Wangji in that moment.

Jiang Wanyin spares two disciples to join Qiren and Wangji on the boat. The healers had rewrapped Wangji’s wounds before they left and Wangji is clad in a spare robe that Wei Wuxian had left behind in one of his visits to Lotus Pier. It’s... strange but also somehow

calming seeing Wangji in the dark robes. It almost feels as if Wei Wuxian is somehow with them in the boat as well.

Wangji sits calmly in the boat, meditating to speed his recovery.

Qiren tries to meditate as well, trying to find comfort in the return of his spiritual energy. He tries to meditate but his mind wanders.

He thinks of Xichen. Had the Moling Su's evil music affected him as well? What about the other Gusu disciples? Did the fire reach Cloud Recesses?

And...

Wei Wuxian.

He had been injured. He had carried Wangji on his back and dragged Qiren by the hand and threw them on a boat and sent them away – running towards the fire with a promise to save Qiren's home and...

He had been injured... and his spiritual energy had been sealed away and...

Qiren opens his eyes and is surprised to see Wangji looking back at him.

"Wei Wuxian is strong," Qiren blurts out and he doesn't know who he's saying it for – Wangji or himself.

Wangji just stares at Qiren and... in that moment Qiren feels like he's looking at his brother.

Why did you bring him into my life? Qiren wants to ask suddenly, a stinging anger running through him. It's humiliating and childish and so unbecoming of an elder, but... But Wangji knew exactly who Wei Wuxian was and he brought him to Cloud Recesses and into Qiren's life and made Qiren care about him and...

Affection.

Love.

Qiren knows better than anyone the dangers of keeping one's heart open... Knows that the more people he cares about the more vulnerable he makes himself – and he should have known better... He should have...

Wangji moves then, stands up to walk across the boat and sit next to Qiren. He grabs Qiren's hand and holds it and his hand is steady and warm.

"Wei Ying is strong," Wangji says and he looks so much like Qiren's brother that Qiren can't help but trust him – believe him.

He's so useless.

Unable to protect his home or his nephews or his nephew's horrible husband.

Uselessly relying on children half his age.

Useless.

Wangji squeezes his hand, breaking him from the dark thoughts. “Wei Ying will be upset that I brought you back so quickly,” he says, “he... worries... about your health.”

Horrible boy. Horrible, horrible boy. Who is he to care about such a useless old man like Qiren?

“Let him worry!” Qiren says, his voice squeezing out from the tightness in his throat. “I won’t let him out of my sight for at least three months for this stunt! How dare he send me off to let him fight alone. How – “ He has to stop then, because the burning in his eyes becomes too much.

He’s too old to be so emotional. It’s unbecoming. Improper.

Humiliating.

He’s such a pathetic, useless excuse of an elder – of an uncle.

“I’m glad you are here with me, uncle,” Wangji says suddenly, his voice quiet and steady in the darkness inside the boat. “I... I know Wei Ying is strong...”

... But Wangji has already lost him once.

Qiren closes his eyes and breathes out slowly from his nose. He feels the steadiness of Wangji’s hand. Remembers the ocean of emotion that Wangji holds inside of him.

Wangji is quiet and calm and careful. It’s easy to forget that he’s all heart.

“He promised me a bouquet in the fall,” Qiren says softly, squeezing Wangji’s hand and feeling embarrassed by the blatant show of affection. Embarrassed but not ashamed. “Your husband has broken all the rules of Cloud Recesses at least once but he’s never broken a promise to me...”

Wangji closes his eyes and just breathes for a moment before he nods.

“Wei Ying is strong,” he says.

“Wei Wuxian is strong.”

---

The sun is high in the sky when they reach Caiyi.

The sun is high and the sky is clear and Caiyi is silent.

The bustling streets and docks are still and quiet – not a man, woman, or child in sight.

A chill goes up Qiren's spine and makes its way around his chest until it feels like there is a vice around his heart. He clenches his hands into fists so that his fingers don't tremble.

Qiren, Wangji, and the two Jiang Sect disciples run through Caiyi and up the mountain as soon as they dock.

Caiyi is quiet and the mountains are quiet and the tightness in Qiren's chest only grows tighter.

Wei Wuxian is strong, he tells himself. Wei Wuxian is strong and Xichen is strong and...

But the Moling Su used dark knowledge and the barbarians used strange weapons and poisons and underhanded tricks and...

"Hanguang-jun!"

Sizhui and Jingyi run towards them, huge smiles on their faces. They skid to a halt just in front of them.

They look... a mess. Dark splotches of what looks like soot on their face and their robes.

But they're smiling.

"Hanguang-jun, are you alright?" Sizhui asks, "Sect Leader Jiang said that you were injured."

"I knew he was exaggerating!" Jingyi says before Wangji can even answer. "Doubtful that those barbarians could really do much damage to you, Hanguang-jun!"

Qiren can almost see hearts coming out of Jingyi's eyes.

"What has become of those barbarians?" Qiren asks, "Caiyi is empty – what has happened to the townspeople?"

"Grandmaster!" Sizhui says, turning to bow suddenly as if just seeing Qiren. "The townspeople have joined us to clean up the damage caused by the fires. We've spent all morning clearing fallen trees and restoring burnt paths –"

"Where is Wei Ying?" Wangji interrupts.

"Zewu-jun took him to the healers," Jingyi answers eagerly. "You should have seen him, Hanguang-jun! Wei-qianbei was amazing! Not as amazing as you, of course, but he put the fires out and defeated –"

Wangji walks past the two disciples and into Cloud Recesses, Qiren is right behind him.

It's strange. Cloud Recesses is saved and the enemy has been defeated but the vice around Qiren's heart doesn't let up at all.

Xichen had taken Wei Wuxian to the healers...

But neither Sizhui nor Jingyi seemed particularly worried... That must mean that Wei Wuxian is alright...

But... Xichen had taken Wei Wuxian to the healers...

Qiren can hear the low notes of Xichen's Liebing as they near the healer quarters. A strange anxiety runs through him – enough to make him stumble his steps. If Xichen is playing Liebing it must mean that Wei Wuxian is unconscious and...

“Ow! Gently, Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian's voice rings out from the healers' quarters.

Qiren numbly follows Wangji into the quarters, feeling strangely out of his body.

“Shut up,” Jiang Wanyin growls, and he's sat in front of Wei Wuxian, blocking Qiren's view of him. “See if I ever rush to come help you again. I can't believe you were clearing the woods when your arms are like this.”

“You're hurting me more than those idio – Lan Zhan!”

Wei Wuxian's head pops up behind Jiang Wanyin's, a huge smile on his face.

Qiren feels almost dizzy with relief. Dizzy and so stupid for having been worried at all. Wei Wuxian is fine. Of course he's fine.

“Uncle!” Wei Wuxian shouts – as if Qiren isn't less than 10 steps away from him – and Qiren has a rule on the tip of his tongue, but Jiang Wanyin moves to the side then and...

Wei Wuxian's arms are burned.

Burned and bloody and...

“You horrible boy,” Qiren whispers, staggering forward. Wangji steadies him, and it's good that he does because Qiren thinks all the strength in his legs might leave him.

Wangji walks him over to Wei Wuxian's bed and sits him down. Qiren's eyes don't leave those blistered, charred arms – they can't.

Qiren reaches out to touch them but stops himself before he can make contact.

They look so painful.

“Ah, sorry, uncle,” Wei Wuxian says, an apologetic smile on his face. He shakes his arms so that his sleeves fall to cover his wounds. “They're gross to look at – I know.”

Horrible boy. Horrible, horrible boy.

Qiren reaches out and grabs Wei Wuxian's fingers, stilling his arm. With his other hand he gently folds back the sleeve of his robe so that he can see the wounds again. He can feel heat and dark energy come from the blistered skin.

He turns to Jiang Wanyin, and Jiang Wanyin hands him the jar of ointment in his hands like he understands.

Qiren dips his fingers into the jar and gently – ever so gently – applies the healing mixture onto Wei Wuxian's wounds.

"I told you to be careful," he whispers through the tightness in his throat.

Wei Wuxian, horrible boy, crooks his head down to catch Qiren's eyes... and he smiles. "I can still pick your bouquet, uncle, don't worry," he says.

Horrible boy.

"Just Lan Zhan will have to help me a little bit." He turns to Wangji and smiles widely, carelessly – like a child. Not like a man who saved Cloud Recesses. "You'll help me Lan Zhan, right? Wash my hair, pick my flowers, feed me breakfast!?"

Wangji huffs a soft laugh and leans down to nose at Wei Wuxian's temple – Wangji is so shameless!

"As you wish," Wangji says indulgently.

Shameless!

Jiang Wanyin groans into his hands and stands up from the bed. "Being in a room with you two together is torture. I'm going out. Don't look for me."

Wei Wuxian sticks his tongue out childishly as he watches Jiang Wanyin leave.

Xichen chuckles as he takes a seat beside Qiren. He grabs Wei Wuxian's other arm and similarly begins to cover the wounds with ointment.

Qiren's hands still at the sound of Xichen's laugh...

"Now this is too much," Wei Wuxian says, trying to pull his hand back from Xichen and Qiren. "The Sect leader and the Grandmaster tending to me? For these little burns? I'm not made of paper you know."

"Hush," Qiren says irritably, pulling Wei Wuxian's hand back close to him. He grabs a roll of gauze from the side of the bed and begins to wrap Wei Wuxian's arm. He's grateful that his hands aren't shaking. He's grateful that Xichen is next to him.

It's grounding.

"Surely the least we can do for our hero," Xichen says gently, a soft smile on his face.

It's been so long since Qiren has seen Xichen truly smile and...

Everything is just so much.

Qiren feels like he's lived a lifetime in two days.

He looks at Wei Wuxian leaning against Wangji unabashedly, pouting like a child as he watches Xichen and Qiren tend to his wounds.

Qiren squeezes Wei Wuxian's finger gently when he's done wrapping, and he reluctantly brings his hands to his own lap.

He feels exhausted. A real, bone deep exhaustion that weighs him down. Makes him almost want to sag his shoulders, bend his back.

His body feels heavy, but his heart feels light.

"Horrible boy," he sighs, hesitantly patting Wei Wuxian's knee, reminding himself that this horrible boy is solid and real and whole, if not a bit burnt. "Horrible, horrible boy."

He looks at Wei Wuxian, the messiness of his hair, the soot on his face and neck, his horrible posture and childish expression.

It's painful and terrifying to feel his heart grow to make room for someone else, but...

"When you heal," Qiren says softly, feeling too tired for anger or scolding or righteousness, "We will go pick flowers together when you heal."

## Chapter End Notes

idk why this suddenly veered into this but it didn't leave my mind so here u go. my plan is to write more sweetness to make up for this but idk.



## End Notes

I might add a Summer and Fall chapter if the inspiration hits me. I just really have a soft spot for Lan Qiren being nice to WWX and them having nice, family moments together - it's my safe space lol. Find me on [tumblr](#)

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